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DEFINING THE INDEFINABLE

BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

I AM well aware that literature, or even such an inconsiderable part of literature as this gay book on my desk or the poem on the printed page, as a whole is indefinable. Every critic of literature from Aristotle down has let some of it slip between his fingers. If he describes the cunning form of a play or a story, then the passion in it, or the mood behind it, eludes him. If he defines the personality of the writer, the art which makes all the difference between feeling and expression escapes definition. No ten philosophers yet agree as to whether beauty is an absolute quality, or simply an attribute of form, whether a poem is beautiful because it suggests and approaches an archetype, or whether it is beautiful because it perfectly expresses its subject.

And yet when the ambition to explain and describe and define everything is humbly set aside, there remains a good honest job for the maker of definitions, and it is a job that can be done. I may not be able to tell what art is, but I can tell what it is not. I may fail to make a formula for literature, but I can try at least to tell what Thomas Hardy has chiefly accomplished, define Conrad's essential quality, point out the nature of romantic naturalism, and distinguish between sentiment and sentimentality. And if such things were ever worth doing they are worth doing now.

Only a prophet dares say that we are at the beginning of a great creative period in the United States, but any open-eyed observer can see that an era of American literary criticism is well under way. The war, which confused and afterward dulled our thinking, stirred innumerable critical impulses, which are coming to the surface, some like bubbles and others like boils, but some new creations of the American intellect. The new generation has shown itself acrimoniously critical. It slaps tradition and names its novels and poetry as Adam named the animals in the garden,

out of its own imagination. The war shook it loose from convention, and, like a boy sent away to college, its first impulse is to disown the Main Street that bore it. Youth of the 1890's admired its elders and imitated them unsuccessfully. Youth of the 1920's imitates France and Russia of the 1870's, and contemporary England. It may eventually do more than the 1890's did with America; in the meantime, while it flounders in the attempt to create, it is at least highly critical. Furthermore, the social unrest, beginning before the war and likely to outlast our time, has made us all more critical of literature. Mark Twain's *Yankee at King Arthur's Court* turned the milk of Tennyson's aristocratic *Idylls* sour. The deep drawn undercurrent of social thinking urges us toward a new consideration of all earlier writing, to see what may be its social significance. The "churl", the "hind", the "peasant", the "first servant" and "second countryman", who were the mere transitions of earlier stories, now are central in literature. They come with a challenge, and when we read Galsworthy, Wells, Sinclair, Dreiser, Hardy's *The Dynasts*, Bennett, we are conscious of criticizing life as we read. The pale cast of thought has sicklied modern pages. The more serious works of art are also literary criticism.

Again, there is the mingling of the peoples, greatest of course in America. Our aliens used to be subservient to the national tradition. They went about becoming rich Americans and regarded the Anglo-American culture as a natural phenomenon, like the climate, to which after a while they would accustom themselves. Their children were born in it. But now it is different. The Jews particularly, who keep an Oriental insistence upon logic even longer than a racial appearance, have passed the acquisitive stage and begin to throw off numerous intellectuals, as much at home in English as their fellow Americans, but critical of the American emotions and the American way of thinking, as only a brain formed by different traditions can be. Soon the Mediterranean races domiciled here will pass into literary expressiveness. It is as impossible that we should not have criticism of the national tradition expressed in our literature as that an international congress should agree upon questions of ethics or religion.

And of course the new internationalism, which is far more vigor-

ous than appears on the surface, favors such criticism. The war brought America and Europe two thousand miles closer, and the habit of interest in what Europeans are thinking, once acquired, is not likely to be lost. No American writer of promise can hope now to escape comparison with the literatures of Western Europe, and comparison means a new impulse to criticism.

Fundamental, creative criticism—like Sainte-Beuve's, Matthew Arnold's, Walter Pater's, like Dryden's, Brunetière's, de Gourmont's, or Croce's—will presumably come. The conditions, both of publication and of audience, are ripe for it now in the United States. But there is a good deal of spade work in the study of literature to be done first, and still more education of the reading American mind. One reason why Lowell was not a great critic was because his scholarship was defective; or, to put it more fairly, because the scholarship of his contemporaries, with whose knowledge he might have buttressed his own, was incomplete. And if a twentieth century Sainte-Beuve should begin to write for general American readers, it is doubtful whether they would accept his premises. Says the intellectual, why *should* he write for the general public? I answer that if he writes for coteries only, if he is disdainful of the intelligent multitude, he will never understand *them*, and so will not comprehend the national literature which it is his function to stimulate, interpret, and guide.

The spade work of criticism is research, investigation into the facts of literature and into its social background. The scholar is sometimes, but not often, a critic. He finds out what happened, and often why it happened. He analyzes, but he does not usually make a synthesis. He writes history, but he cannot prophesy, and criticism is prophecy implied or direct. Few outside the universities realize the magnitude of American research into literature, even into American literature, which has been relatively neglected. A thousand spades have been at work for a generation. We are getting the facts, or we are learning how to get them.

But before we may expect great criticism we must educate our public, and ourselves, in that clear vision of what is and what is not which from Aristotle down has been the preliminary to criticism. A humble but a useful way to begin is by definition.

I use definition in no pedantic sense. I mean, in general,

logical definition, where the class or *genus* of the thing to be described—whether best-selling novel or sentimental tendency—is first made clear, and then its *differentia*, its differences from the type analyzed, cut and assorted. But this process in literature cannot be as formal as logic. Good literature cannot be bound by formulas. Yet when a poem charged with hot emotion, or a story that strays into new margins of experience, is caught and held until one can compare it with others, see the curve on which it is moving, guess its origin and its aim, forever after it becomes easier to understand, more capable of being thought about and appreciated. And when the current of taste of some new generation that overflows conventions and washes forward, or backward, into regions long unlaved, is viewed as a current, its direction plotted, its force estimated, its quality compared, why that is definition, and some good will come of it.

Some general definition of that intellectual emotion which we call good reading is especially needed in America. Most of us, if we are native born, have been educated by a set of literary conventions arranged in convenient categories. That is more or less true of all literary education, but it is particularly true in the United States, where the formal teaching of English literature *per se* began, where, as nowhere else in the world, there was a great and growing population eager to become literate and with no literary traditions behind it. The student from a bookless home learned to think of his literature as primarily something to be studied; the teacher who had to teach thousands like him was forced to reduce living literature to dead categories in order that a little of it at least should be taught. Thousands of Americans, therefore, of our generation emerged from their training with a set of literary definitions which they assumed to be true and supposed to be culture. Only true definitions of what literature really is can break up such fossilized defining.

On the other hand, that large proportion of our best reading population which is not native in its traditions offers a different but equally important problem. How can the son of a Russian Jew, whose father lived in a Russian town, who himself has been brought up in clamorous New York, understand Thoreau, let us

say, or John Muir, or Burroughs, or Willa Cather, without some defining of the nature of the American environment and the relation between thought and the soil? How is an intelligent German-American, whose cultural tradition has been thoroughly Teutonic, to make himself at home in a literature whose general character, like its language, is English, without some defining of the Anglo-American tradition? Lincoln must be defined for him; Milton must be defined for him; most of all perhaps Franklin must be defined for him. I have chosen elementary examples, but my meaning should be sufficiently clear.

And the American critic—by which I mean you, discriminating reader, as well as the professional who puts pen to paper—is equally in need of the art of definition. The books we read and write are on different planes of absolute excellence or unworthiness. There is—to take the novel—the story well calculated to pass a pleasant hour but able to pass nothing else; there is the story with a good idea in it and worth reading for the idea only; there is the story worthless as art but usefully catching some current phase of experience; and there is the fine novel which will stand any test for insight, skill, and truth. Now it is folly to apply a single standard to all these types of story. It can be done, naturally, but it accomplishes nothing except to eliminate all but the shining best. That is a task for history. In the year in which we live—and it is sometimes necessary to remind the austerer critic that we always live in the present—there are a hundred books, of poetry, of essays, of biography, of fiction, which are by no means of the first rank and yet are highly important, if only as news of what the world, in our present, is thinking and feeling. They cannot be judged, all of them, on the top plane of perfect excellence; and if we judge them all on any other plane, good, better, best get inextricably mixed.

For example, consider a novel which at the moment of this writing is a best-seller. I mean Mr. Hutchinson's *If Winter Comes*. This book is essentially the tragedy of a good and honest soul thrown by harsh circumstance into an environment which is bound to crush him. He has the wrong wife, he has the wrong business associates, the girl he loves is separated from him by moral barriers. If he breaks through these he injures irrepara-

bly his own sense of what is due to his God and his fellow man. His instincts of charity, humor, and love rebound upon him. He is too Christian for England, and too guileless for life. This is a worthy theme, and yet if we judge this novel on the highest plane it fails miserably. For Mr. Hutchinson stacks the cards. He gives his hero his way and his salvation, after much suffering, by a series of lucky accidents. He destroys the problem he creates, by forging an answer.

But this novel should not be finally judged on the highest plane. It is not a tragedy, it is a romance. It belongs on the plane below, the plane of stories told to meet the secret desires of humanity, which have little to do with reality, and are quite oblivious to fact. On this plane *If Winter Comes* ranks highly, for it is poignantly told, there is life in its characters, and truth in the best of its scenes. Definition saves us from calling a good novel great; it spares us the unnecessary error of calling a good and readable story bad because it is not a triumph of consistent art.

To see that a given book is good for *this* but not good for *that*, may be praised for its plot, but certainly has not character enough to get long life, is hard. But when the difficulty of adjusting standards is increased by the irresponsible hullabaloo of commercial appreciation, no wonder that sensible people estimate foolishly, and critics of standing are induced to write for publication remarks that some day will (or should) make them sick. For the publishers' "blurb" confuses all standards. Every book is superlative in everything. And the hack reviewer, when he likes a book, likes everything and applies Shakespearean adjectives and Tolstoyan attributes to creatures of dust and tinsel, or blunders helplessly into dispraise of scholarship, restraint, subtlety, taste, originality—anything that he does not understand.

There is no help except to set books upon their planes and assort them into their categories—which is merely to define them before beginning to criticize. This is elementary work, as I have said, which may lead the critic only so far as the threshold, and cannot always give the reader that complete and sympathetic comprehension of what he has read which is the final object of literary criticism. However, in an age when overemphasis has been commercialized, and where the powerful forces of print can be mo-

bilized and sent charging everywhere to bowl down contrary opinions, it is indispensable.

Scholarly books have been dispraised because they were not exciting; fine novels have been sneered at because they were hard to read; cheap stories have been proclaimed great because they wore a pretence of seriousness; sentimentality has been welcomed because it was warm hearted; indecency has been condemned for immorality; immorality has slipped through as romance; daring has been mistaken for novelty; painstaking dulness, for careful art; self-revelation, for world knowledge; pretty writing, for literature; violence, for strength; and warped and unhealthy egoism for the wise sincerity which is the soul of literature. In all such instances definition is the prophylactic, and often the cure.

Writers, most of all, need to define their tasks. I do not mean their technical problems merely, although I cannot conceive that a dramatist or playwright, who has his subject well in mind, can possibly be hurt by thinking out his methods with the most scrupulous care. Lubbock's recent book on *The Craft of Fiction* has emphasized an art of approach and point of view in the great novelists which was thoroughly conscious, even though they may never have tried to formulate it in words. I mean particularly the defining of their themes, their objectives. Many modern novels of the better class, and a great many modern poems, seem to me awash and wallowing like derelicts on the high seas. They are successful enough in this, excellent in that, but they get nowhere, because the writers had felt the emotion that made them, or suffered the experience, but never defined it in terms of all emotion, all experience, never considered its end. The three dots . . . of modern literature are significant. We break off our efforts, partly no doubt because we seek effects of impressionism, more often because imagination went no further. Near things are sharp and expressed with remarkable vividness, ultimate objectives are blurred; which is to say, they lack definition.

May the shades of Dr. Johnson, Charles Lamb, Emerson, and all great individualists protect us from bad definitions, and especially from rigid or formal ones! Bad definitions destroy themselves, for if they are thoroughly bad no one believes them,

and if they contain those pleasing half truths which a generation loves to suckle upon, why then after their vogue they will wither into nothingness. Such definitions are of the letter, and die by it, but stiff, clumsy definitions kill the spirit. To define a great man by a formula is to sink to the lowest practice of the worst class rooms. To define a tendency so sharply that it cannot flow without breaking the definition, is a lecturer's trick for which audiences should stone him. Solemn generalizations which squat upon a book like an ostrich on a goose egg and hatch out vast moral philosophies, are to be dreaded like the devil; as are, equally, the critics with pet theories, who, having defined them, make everything from a squib to an epic fit their definition.

Definitions which classify without margins are a special evil: the division into literature and journalism for example, with no allowance for interlocking; or the confident separation of all books into categories of good or bad. Wholesale definitions are also objectionable, where, having defined a poem as magazine verse, or a collection of articles as a magazine, or a book as a sex story, or a man as a journalist, or a tendency as erratic or erotic, you think you have said something. May the muse of clear thinking, and the little humorous gods who keep the sense of proportion balancing, protect us from these also!

It occurs to me, at the very end of this essay, that I have made but a lame attempt to define definition. This, however, is as it should be. For definition, in the sense in which I am using it, like literature, has much of the indefinable. It is a tool merely, or better still, because less rigid, a means by which the things we enjoy and that profit us may be placed in perspective, ranged, compared, sorted, and distinguished. It is what Arnold meant by seeing steadily and seeing whole. It is the scientist's microscope that defines relationship, and equally the painter's brush that by a touch reveals the hidden shapes of nature and the blend of colors. It is, like these instruments, a *means* and not an *end*. Let pedants, scholiasts, formalists, and dilettantes take to heart this final description of literary definition.

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY.